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CONCERNING NAGGING WOMEN.

BY CYRUS EDSON, M. D.

WHEN Douglas Jerrold wrote that most interesting series, *Mrs. Caudle's Curtain Lectures*, he made all men and women who read them laugh most heartily. He drew fairly enough the portrait of the nagging woman; the woman who ceaselessly complains and scolds, and generally makes a nuisance of herself to every one who is cursed by being brought into contact with her.

In a ruder society than this, that existed at a time when men believed in physical punishment to a greater extent than they do now, the ducking or drenching stool and the branks were in vogue as special punishments for women who nagged and scolded. The first consisted of a rough seat at the end of a pole like a sweep. The offender, being well strapped in, was ducked in a pond a number of times. The second was an iron frame fitted on the head, with a projecting piece of iron which, when the frame was locked on, rested on the tongue.

There is a scientific aspect of this habit of nagging and scolding which is of no little interest. First, the effect of it on the person who nags; second, that on those who are nagged. Regarding the former, it must be premised that perfect health has, as one of its factors, content of mind. A nervous man or woman who is anxious, discontented, gloomy, dissatisfied, worried from any cause, cannot enjoy good health. This mental turmoil produces as one of its primary effects on the body an inability to digest food properly. The blood which should supply the force necessary for the function of digestion is continually drawn away from the stomach by the excitement in the brain, and the woman who nags suffers.

While there be those whose tendency to lay on fat is so great

that nothing will stop it, a nagging man or woman is generally thin. Their habit of mind has partially starved their bodies. It is a physical law that when nature attacks the health of an individual she calls to her aid innumerable factors or agencies, all of which tend to assist her in her destructive work, and this inability to properly digest, originally brought on by nagging, has its reflex action on the brain, and greatly increases the ability and the desire to nag. I have seen two cases of what Shakespeare calls "these cursed shrews" who died really as the result of the violence of their own tempers. It is more common, however, to find that this habit of dissatisfaction with all the acts of others produces in time some form of insanity. The excessive excitement wears the brain out at last. The Chinese punishment of lack of sleep produces mania about the thirteenth day, and although the influences to which naggers subject their own brains are not as acute, they in time are apt to bring about the same result. These people never give their brains the rest of contentment. They are never satisfied with anything done by others. As over two-thirds of their grievances are imaginary—that is, over two-thirds of the grievances for which they scold have no existence except as inventions in their own disordered brains—the inability of insanity to distinguish between the real and the unreal has begun to show itself. In view of the misery and unhappiness which naggers inflict on those around them, we need not waste much pity on them. The sooner they kill themselves, the sooner their insanity so far develops as to make it possible to place them in an asylum, the better it is for every one; for naggers are a curse, not only to themselves (they are most unhappy people), but every one. More than this, they do a fearful amount of harm. Take, for example, a busy man whose unkind fate has given him a nagger for a wife. In this day and generation to say a man is busy implies that he has need of every particle of force his food will supply to carry on his work. When this man comes home from his office he must have rest. This is not a thing he may dispense with; he *must* have it. When he takes his food he must be let alone, so that the blood will find its way to the stomach and there enable him to properly digest that food, so that he may acquire a fresh store of force for use on the morrow. If he does not get this force, then to do his work he must, by aid of stimulants, attract the necessary force from the reserves.

These reserves we call stamina. Now this means nervous exhaustion sooner or later, or else "this way madness lies."

The man comes home and the nagging wife begins. If the man be physically strong, fair-minded, and just, his mind will revolt in time from the injustice of his wife's accusations. It is the peculiarity of the nagger to enormously exaggerate everything, even if she do not invent her grievances. Forgetfulness on the part of a husband is annoying, as it is in any one, but it is not a crime. A continual stream of scolding, lasting three or four hours, over the failure to post a letter will cause any man to consider the effect disproportionate to the cause. If the husband be healthy, if he is not cursed with a highly nervous organization, what happens? The first thing is, that any love he may have ever had for his wife dies, drowned in the flood of words. Having murdered his love for her, the wife keeps up the nagging; he speedily begins to look on her as being a nuisance; from this to dislike and then to positive hatred is not a long journey. If there be children, the husband may continue to live with her for their sake, but it is an awful home in which to bring up children. The man quickly learns that he has in his physical strength something in which he can claim sanctuary. He may not actually beat her, because the restraining influences of his training have not lost their hold on him. Perhaps it would be better for her if he did, for physical fear of a whipping might be sufficient to make her control herself. While he may not lift his finger to her, he will invariably become brutal, except in such cases as I shall hereafter mention. In such a contest the woman has no chance. He may not be, he probably is not, able to give the rapier-like thrust of sarcasm which comes so easily to her, but he can use the bludgeon of abuse and profanity with terrible effect. The nervous condition the woman has created in herself by her nagging, itself renders her powerless before this weapon of her husband. Such a family is a hell on earth. It was the son of such a household who said in the simplest and most matter-of-fact way when he heard of a wedding, "Another life quarrel commenced!" What a comment on his parents!

Men of what I may call the second class take refuge from a nagging woman in flight. According to their degree in the social scale they resort to clubs or bar-rooms for that peace they can never find at home. Then we hear suddenly that So-and-So

has gone to the dogs ; his money has been lost in gambling, or he has become a drunkard. There are more of these men than most people imagine, and, for one, I have never been able to join in the chorus of sympathy for the wife.

It is on the third class of men that a nagging wife has the most baneful effect. It is saying little to say these men are ruined by the women they marry ; ruined in body, in mind, in heart, and often ruined in purse as well, for they cannot do their work in life, owing to the nagging of their wives. These men are nervous, highly strung, to use a common phrase, and generally exceedingly affectionate. They have what I may call the "dog-like" disposition in the way they care for their wives, who are destroying them. They remind one of the old English rhyme : "A woman, a *dog*, and a walnut tree ; the more you beat 'em the better they be." Nothing is more strange in human nature than the continued love these men give their wives. I knew of a case once where the nagging of a wife drove her nervous husband to an asylum, where he died, the victim of melancholia brought on by the ceaseless nervous irritation produced by his wife's tongue, yet to the day of his death he worshipped that wife. His greatest sorrow while in the asylum was the fact that he was not permitted to see her, her visits having been forbidden, because even when she had driven him crazy, she never saw him without nagging until he would have a most distressing attack of his malady afterward. Naturally the physicians in charge put a stop to her visits. Yet that woman, the murderess of her husband's mind, used to ask for and receive sympathy from her acquaintances on the ground that her unfortunate husband was insane. I never saw her without a feeling of abhorrence I cannot put into words.

All of us understand what a disagreement in judgment means, and we all know what it is to argue. We know that when we meet people who disagree with us on any matter—say the tariff, for example—there is a certain mental excitement produced by the argument that follows, which, providing the subject be on the tariff, is generally pleasant enough. During the heat of that argument it would be found, were one to take the temperature of certain parts of the head, that those parts were considerably warmer than the other parts of the body. After the argument is over there is, if it has been a sharp one, a feel-

ing of slight fatigue ; if the argument be held immediately after dinner the chances are it will be followed by a slight attack of indigestion. It produces other physical effects. Ofttimes a man will find his hands perspire in the palms, and if it be a cold day he will find the room, perfectly comfortable before, seems to have become warm. This means that the excitement in the brain produced by the mental effort in the argument has had a reflex action on the nerves of the body, and these in turn have induced a quicker beat of the heart. The phenomena I have described are familiar to all men. The essence of argument is opposition or disagreement. When one person scolds another the mental action of the second is opposition and disagreement. This needs no proof. A sharp scolding will bring on in the person scolded all the phenomena seen after a heated argument, and the reasons are apparent. Now, the essence of nagging may be said to be fault-finding or scolding. It is, in fact, nothing more than never-ending scolding ; hence, nagging produces continual brain excitement and continual reflex irritation of the nerves.

It may be laid down as a broad proposition which will not be denied, that continued brain excitement has in time a disastrous effect on the cerebral tissue and the nerves. The physical injury done when the brain is continually excited by nagging is akin to that produced by overwork. While this is true, the injury is greater, because the excitement contains in it the element of anger. It is not only the stimulated mental condition of intense study or work ; it is necessarily wholly without the element of tranquillity. It is a double irritation, a double excitement, in which each part acts and reacts on the other, intensifying the effect of both. I can illustrate my meaning by saying that, if the draft on the nervous force caused by anger be represented by x , and that caused by intense study by y , the draft caused by nagging would be xy , or, the first multiplied by the second. This means that nagging involves a most destructive waste of nervous force. It will be apparent from what I have said that not only is the person who is nagged subjected to an intense and destructive nervous strain, but that, owing to the fact that this implies a robbery of the other parts of the body of that excess of blood necessary to a proper accomplishment of their functions, the body is not allowed to create the force from the food taken which would in a measure support this strain.

This is burning the candle at both ends with a vengeance. Small wonder then that men break down.

It sometimes happens that a woman is a nagger, owing to causes which she cannot control. There are diseases which affect women that have a most disastrous effect on the nerves, and therefore on the temper. There is no real difference between the nagging of these women and that of those who are simply naturally "cussed," because each is marked by the same unfairness, the same exaggeration of the alleged causes of grievance, the same eternal and ceaseless flow of words, the same envenomed personality in the attack, the same meanness in the imputation of the motives, the same insolence, the same inability to see what is true; but there is a most interesting and curious psychological difference in the effect of this nagging on the nerves of the person nagged. If a physician who has for a patient one of those docile "dog-like" men, who is rapidly being driven into a dangerous condition by the ceaseless nerve irritation, be able to tell the patient that the woman is not responsible for what she does, that she herself is the victim of disease, he will find an enormous change in the condition of that patient at once. Not only has the physician aroused a feeling of sympathy for the illness of the wife in the mind of the husband, but the nagging ceases to excite anger. The husband believes, first, that the wife is not responsible for her acts; second, that were she in possession of health she would not nag; third, that if her health could be restored the torture would cease. In other words, that which I have called x in my mathematical presentation of the mental condition is eliminated, and y only remains. What is more, the feeling of sympathy is in itself a force which will serve to neutralize the power of y . The nagging then becomes to the nagged the equivalent of a little more mental work, and this must be endured. To further illustrate the psychological side of this subject, all physicians are familiar with the nervous, irritable condition into which many women get prior to the birth of children. It often happens that this condition is in varying degree coincident with pregnancy, and that, as a result of it, the wife nags unceasingly. This has no effect on the husband whatever, provided he understands the cause; on the contrary, he will not only be able to control his temper, but he will often find the most outrageous accusations, which, were they made by another or by his wife without a cause

beyond her control, would produce in him extreme indignation and anger, have no effect on him. Under such circumstances he will not only never allude to them, but will, should the wife, as she often does, recall them with shame, belittle them to the utmost or stoutly deny that she ever said such things. These two statements of the psychological effect on the mind of the husband, of the conviction of the irresponsibility of the wife for the nagging, not only point to the method by which the physician may help a patient suffering from nagging, but they show up sharply the real source of the nervous irritation from which such patients suffer. This is the conviction in their minds that other people can believe such things as are said to be true of them. In other words, it is in the revolt against the injustice of nagging and the anger resulting from the necessity of such revolt that the chief part of the nervous irritation of nagging is to be found.

There exist in Spain and Italy certain persons who pursue one of the most damnable trades known to men. These are they who distort the limbs of children in order to produce those deformities which will excite the compassion of the charitable. These manufactured cripples supplied Victor Hugo with the subject of one of his most fantastically horrible tales, *L'Homme Qui Rit*. It is needless to say that these people, whenever found, are punished as severely as possible by the law. The imagination almost shrinks before the devilishness of man which can permit itself to take a child and distort and twist and misshape its soft bones until it is a perfectly helpless cripple, destined to draw out his or her weary life in pain. When we contemplate such acts there is a feeling of ferocity produced, and one feels that the worst tortures of the Middle Ages, or of such abodes of cruelty as Siam or China are too mild, for children are so helpless, so unprotected; cruelty to them is such devilish, cowardly, mean cruelty!

What, then, shall be said of that nagger who distorts and twists and misshapes the mind of a child? What shall be said of the woman who cripples all the moral innocence and mental powers of the little ones committed to her care? Is not this damnable, devilish? Does not such a woman deserve the execration of all men and women? The effect of nagging on men of "dog-like" dispositions has already been described. Unfortunately—I should say fortunately, for what is more beautiful and what should be more sacred than the unquestioning confidence and trust of the

little ones—all children are “dog-like.” It is true, a majority are nothing more than healthy little animals from whose minds and memories scolding runs off as water from the back of a duck, but there are children (and in this age of nerves I should think the proportion would be about one in twenty) who are exceedingly sensitive. Unfortunately, too, the child of a nagging woman and a “dog-like” man has every chance of having a most nervous disposition. It seems to me the spectacle of one of these nervous children, timid, affectionate, with a strongly developed conscience, in the grasp of a nagging mother, is the most pitiable I know of, the little one is so helpless, the torture is so fiendish. Often a child is simply nagged to death, and one is bound to feel only joy over the deliverance; for, if it lives, it reaches manhood or womanhood with shattered nerves and a ruined constitution. The physical result in the case of such a child may be better understood by a brief reference to what childhood means. Childhood is the period of growth; the child is given by nature an extraordinarily active digestion; children eat nearly three times as much food in proportion to their weight as do grown people. The food provided by nature for the infant is wonderfully nutritious; no such amount of all the elements needed for growth and development is to be found in any combination of which we have knowledge. During the first ten years of a child’s life its business is to grow. The more of an animal we can keep it during this period the better. It ought to eat, to sleep, to play, romp, enjoy itself in a physical way at this time in its life. It must in part prepare itself for life’s work. It lays the foundation of that physical structure which in time will be crowned by mental achievement. I am glad to say people are beginning to understand that children should not be forced too much mentally during the first ten years of life.

If a nagger be allowed to interfere with a child at this time the result is disastrous. Children have a far keener sense of justice than the majority of people believe, but so far as the expression of this feeling is concerned they are dumb. Under the torture of nagging, more than often emphasized by slapping or whipping, they must suffer in silence. “It’s no matter, dolly, if you didn’t, you have got to be slapped,” said a little girl once to her doll, and I think no such indictment was ever drawn by men skilled in the law as was this against that little one’s mother. In place of being allowed to grow strong, to digest their food properly and build up

for themselves healthy bodies, the children of nagging women have the force diverted into the support of their nerves under the attacks made on them. Is it any wonder if they have no constitutions when they reach manhood or womanhood ?

Not only is the child's physical health ruined, its mind is injured more than I can easily explain. The constant exaggeration inseparable from nagging prevents the growth in the mind of the child of mental perspective. Children are essentially imitative ; they receive most of their impressions second-hand. This is necessarily so at first in any one's life, because, of all mental processes, judgment is the slowest of development. When, therefore, a child is in constant contact with a person who takes enormously exaggerated views of everything, it never has a chance to understand judgment. Its mind grows one-sided ; it learns to look on everything from the standpoint of its conceptions. It would be impossible to imagine a worse preparation for the business of life. Nor is this all. The effect of nagging on the child's moral qualities is extremely bad. The constant, unceasing injustice warps the better nature. The dumb anger induced through so many years stimulates the growth of passion in the mind of the child ; in time it becomes absolutely unable to do justice to others, simply because its sense of justice, naturally strong in all children, is destroyed. Just as tyranny makes tyrants of those tyrannized over when they in turn have power, so the injustice of nagging kills the sense of justice. Then, too, in order to shield itself from the intolerable torture, the child naturally resorts to lies. It is not to be blamed for this, for, as the exaggeration of nagging is almost invariably nothing but falsehood, the little one cannot know any better.

What remedy is there ? I say regretfully, there is none whatever except public opinion. Those who suffer, if they be adults, shrink from facing their misery, and if they are children, they know of no appeal. There is, however, a duty which should be regarded as sacred. If there are children, and if the wife or husband be a nagger, then the other should do something to protect the little ones. He or she who refuses is as guilty toward them as is their torturer. I may say more guilty, because she or he knows from personal experience what the torture is. The little ones can have no other friend ; no one else knows ; no one else can interfere.

CYRUS EDSON.